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THE RECENT HISTORY AND PRESENT STATUS OF THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM.

TO ONE who has read, even cursorily, the exhaustive amount of material which has been read before educational gatherings or has appeared in educational journals, on the subject of English in the secondary school, in the past four or five years, it becomes no easy task to find some new and untouched problem, or to attack the old problems from any fresh point of view. It is not my purpose, therefore, to discuss any particular phase of the teaching of English, nor to make any original contribution either to the matter or the method of the subject, but rather, from the history of the growth and development of the English curriculum during the past decade, to bring into clearer light both what we have done and what still remains to be done. If, out of an analysis of the conditions operating to enlarge and strengthen the work in English; and if, out of a review of the steps whereby that curriculum has emerged, so to speak, into self-consciousness; and if, further, out of an analysis of the deluge of material with which we have been well-nigh submerged, I shall bring to the light of day something *non solum ad intuendum*, as Cicero puts it, *verum etiam ad imitandum*, I shall have done all that is in my thought to do.

A retrospect of the course in English during the past ten or fifteen years reveals a progress that is as revolutionary as it is encouraging. 'Tis a far throw from the narrow, scanty, circumscribed character of the work in English as it existed ten years ago in our secondary schools, to the broad, rich, generous, and vitalizing curriculum which we see today. Its growth has been an essentially organic one and has followed with striking and scrupulous fidelity the general laws of organic development. From a state of almost pure potentiality, we have seen it emerge into a separate and distinctive entity, gradually but steadily dissociating itself from the other subjects, and slowly but irresistibly gaining recognition for itself and for its right to a place in the hierarchy of studies.

To the pessimist, perhaps, this view of the situation may seem unwarrantably optimistic, and he may be tempted to call attention to the fact that, out of all the discussion and experimentation of the past decade, there is comparatively little upon which we are yet agreed. The situation apparently, in many respects, is as chaotic as ever. As one reads article after article on this and that phase of the English work, it may seem that we are as far at sea as we ever were, and that there is nothing definite yet attained upon which there is anything like agreement among authorities. One favors the use of the books set for college entrance requirements, another would reject them *in parte* or *in toto*. One believes that these books should be read in one order, another in another; one claims they should all be read in the senior year, another that they should be scattered through the entire four years; one believes that grammar should be taught in the high schools, another thinks it has no right there and should be completed in the grades; one is an earnest advocate of the claims of rhetoric to a place in the curriculum; another is equally insistent that these claims are irrational and ridiculous; one believes in much composition, and another in little, and so on, *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*. And, looking at the number of vexatious problems that still call for settlement, there may be a slight temptation to discouragement, and some mild justification for at least a tinge of pessimism. And yet this is but the natural note of occasional despondency which inevitably attends all growth and progress, and cannot possibly be regarded as a permanent or final attitude.

Evidences of an undeniable growth in both the social and educational interest in the subject of English are so numerous and convincing as to give abundant warrant to that attitude of modest optimism which, while admitting defects, and acknowledging imperfection, yet has faith in the higher tendency of events and the ultimate triumph of the best.

In the first place, English has, practically, in that period, come to assume a distinctive and individual place in the program of studies, and is rated on the same footing as Latin, German, History, and Physics. This alone is a progressive step of the first

rank, and indicates a growth in the appreciation and recognition of our mother tongue which may well call for felicitation.

In the second place, as a corollary of its recognition as a study of distinct cultural and disciplinary value, has come a time-apportionment adjusted to its merits. Instead of one period or occasionally two periods per week, we are now seldom content with less than four, and the growing tendency is toward five. This is but the outward expression of our feeling that English has claims of its own to all the rights and emoluments granted to other studies whose traditional aristocracy has hitherto given them undisputed sway over our course of study. We have come to some genuine appreciation of our own literature and to some active conception of the vital importance of cultivating in our young people a love for the true, the beautiful, and the good, which in such glittering store await the diligent delver after hidden treasure in the mine of English literature. "The course of study in English," says the committee on college entrance requirements, "should include two elements, the study of English literature and the cultivation of the art of expression;" and, further, it says:

English offers all, or nearly all, the opportunities for mental training afforded by the study of any language, and introduces the pupil to the literature of his own tongue, which must always be the chief source of his own inspirations, ideals, and æsthetic enjoyment, and must also be the vehicle of his communication with his fellow-men.

Upon the importance, then, of cultivating in our pupils a love for the noblest and best in English literature, we have come to unanimous and hearty agreement in the past ten years. In saying this I do not mean that there did not exist a keen and lively appreciation of English literature in the minds of teachers and parents previous to that time. Abundant evidence would contradict any such view. I would say, however, that the obligation to place it systematically before our young people, to guide and direct their steps in the bewildering and tortuous paths of literature, to vitalize their whole character and life with its truths, its inspirations, its ideals, its beauties, was not consciously present; and only as they came to it through the guidance of

cultivated and intelligent parents, or through the accidental and incidental interest of some inspiring teacher, did they come to know the glories of that literature to which the words of the most eloquent of Roman orators may well be transferred: "It nourishes youth, delights old age, adds honor to prosperity, is a refuge and a solace in adversity, is a source of delight at home and abroad, is with us in the night watches, in our wanderings, and at our rustic seats."

And so, through the agitation and discussion of recent years, we have come to recognize our obligations in this matter, and, whatever differences of opinion may exist regarding the particular bits of literature that should be read, we are all agreed that, to the extent to which time allows, a few at least of those noble works of English literature which have shed immortal luster on the English race and have bathed us all in something of the reflected glory and brilliance of their radiance, enlightening our minds, subduing our hearts, vivifying our wills, should be brought under the careful and thoughtful study of our young people. Upon this, I may say confidently, we are all agreed, and no more important development has taken place in the past ten years in educational activity than this same sense of obligation and responsibility for the cultivation of right tastes, of inspiring ideals, of enriching sentiments in our young men and women. The effect of this upon the social fabric, while not perhaps appreciable in the immediate present, cannot be otherwise than stimulating and suggestive to the coming generation. The general average of literary standards and taste will be raised, and the time cannot be far distant when the results of this cumulative work on the part of the educational forces of the country must be felt from the most populous cities to the most isolated farms.

Another point in which great gain is noticeable is in the matter of composition. The time dates not so far back when one or two essays a term was deemed adequate, or if not adequate, it was at least all that was demanded. Gradually there came to consciousness the feeling that composition as a vital mode of social communication—one of the essential ways

by which we impart our thought to others and receive their thought to ourselves—must be taught more extensively, systematically, and continuously. As this thought became dynamic, more and more consideration, a larger measure of time, and wider and more scientific training in the art of expression became manifest. Composition—the art of expressing one's self accurately, forcefully, felicitously, with the design of influencing or delighting our fellow—came more and more to assume its rightful place and value, and we now concede to no exercise a higher importance, either from a disciplinary or utilitarian point of view. When we compare the meager attention given to composition in our school days with that which is now bestowed upon it, we come to some realization of the almost revolutionary character of the attitude—social and educational—toward composition.

Another evidence of the enhanced importance of English lies in the increased teaching force. Not so many years ago teachers whose time was entirely devoted to the work in English, save in the largest high schools, where there were so many pupils that even one or two recitations a week would consume the entire time of one teacher—save in such schools and under such circumstances, I say, special teachers in English were an unknown feature in secondary work. English teaching, such as it was, was done by anybody and everybody, anyhow and everyhow, in the interstices of other duties. Now how different! Teachers especially equipped and trained in English are as much in demand as are teachers trained in the classics and in science. Every secondary school worthy of the name has its one, two, three, or more, teachers whose whole time is devoted to instruction in English language and literature in some one or more of its phases; and, save in incidental ways like grammatical errors, oral discourse, or mistakes in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc., the other teachers are rightly not held to accountability for the work in English. This fact is another indication of the higher responsibility and obligation which we have come to feel toward instruction in English. Society is willing, nay anxious, to expend its money; and men and women

are willing to devote their life efforts and energies to improving the medium of communication and to enriching the intellectual treasures of the oncoming generation. That is a marvelous advance in thought from a generation ago and well deserves our thoughtful pride.

In the number, the character, and the content of our textbooks, we find still another evidence of the increased interest, the productive thought, and the improved tools whereby our English instruction is given. We may feel that we are well-nigh submerged with new texts, but the multiplicity of them is proof of a certain demand far in advance of other days, and the strenuous attempts at originality, whether in form or content, are equal proof that, like the Athenians of old, we are ever seeking after something new, and are so interested in the subject that we are devouring all sorts of patent nostrums for accomplishing the desired end.

And so, whether they are heavy or light, whether they are as bare of illustrations as a bodkin, or whether they are mere picture books; whether they advocate this mode of approach and this course of treatment, or whether, for novelty's sake, they advocate directly the opposite, at all events they are catering to a live and active interest and are appealing to a teaching constituency which is as thirsty for some new idea in methods of teaching as the Ancient Mariner was for water. And it is all the manifestation, whether viewed from the standing point of demand or supply, whether exercised rationally or irrationally, of that lively interest which will in time, through many an error and much of stumbling, work such desirable good to English and American life—active and passive.

And now as to the unsettled problems. We are agreed on the main lines of our English instruction—literature, composition, grammar, familiarity with at least the fundamental principles of rhetoric. It is on the details only, I think I may safely say, that we find differences of opinion, inevitable in the constructive process of any work, whether material or spiritual.

It is doubtful whether the English curriculum can ever become as fixed and determinate as the curriculum in Latin or mathe-

matics. There are inherent difficulties in the subject which make that improbable, if not impossible—and doubtless undesirable even if possible. We have been, however, working toward definiteness and some degree of unity, and, while the time will never come, I fancy, when the courses in different schools will agree, there will soon, if there has not already, come a time when we shall be in substantial agreement on the essential features of such a curriculum.

The unsolved problems are the problems which logically grow out of progress and it will be an unfortunate day when they shall all be solved. New problems in English, as in other parts of the program of studies, must arise with changing conditions in the social organism, and only as *it* ceases to grow will problems cease to arise. Shall we or shall we not accept and use the books recommended for college entrance requirements? That is a question which the test of experiment will settle for us within a few years. We have no need to hurry the process by *a priori* arguments pro or con, or by premature analogies with the feudal system or the human organism. If it is found not to adjust itself closely and logically to the needs of life and society, it will be banished to the limbo of discarded absurdities; but, if it does, it will live. As an effort after unity and definiteness, it is wholly to be commended; and attacking it on the ground of something imposed from without, as a phase of a sort of feudal conception of the relation of college to secondary school, as Professor Scott has done, is neither warranted by the motives which inspired it nor by the necessities which occasioned it. Whether the list of books selected is a permanent and final one, or whether it is but a step in the evolution of the English curriculum, is a question for the future historian of educational progress to determine; but at present the list is serving a most useful and commendable purpose in giving concreteness, definiteness, and unity to what was in danger of becoming a most chaotic and hopeless mess.

The evolution of the English curriculum, on its philosophic side, is but the outward manifestation of an inner striving after a closer and finer identification of the parts of the social organ-

ism with one another. In the unity of thought, feeling, and will created by the study of the masterpieces of the human mind, we find the ground for a higher social life. In the centering of interest on the art of expression, we find the search after a better understanding and a closer identification of ourselves with our fellow-men, wherein less of friction, of misunderstanding, of maladjustment, shall be found, because of the misuse and abuse of language.

And so today the teachers of English *par excellence* may feel that, in the process of social evolution and in the work which they do in elevating the tastes, stimulating the ideals, ennobling the feelings of the younger generation through English literature, and likewise in binding society more closely and more intelligently together by a more exact and scientific use of the art of expression—oral and written—they are playing a part second to none, whether considered from the view-point of society as a whole, or from that of the individual.

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